MEMOIR

OF

JAMES WILLIAM BEEKMAN.

PREPARED AT THE REQUEST OF THE

SAINT NICHOLAS SOCIETY

OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

BY

EDWARD F. DE LANCEY.

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Directors Sept. 19, 1924.

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EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE SAINT NICHOLAS SOCIETY.

At a Special Meeting, held at Delmonico's, Madison Square, on the 12th day of November, 1877, after the reading of the following Memoir of James William Beekman by Mr. Edward F. de Lancey, it was resolved:

"That the thanks of the Society be tendered to Mr. de Lancey for his very able and instructive paper, and that a copy be requested for preservation among the archives of the Society, and that it be printed by the Society for distribution among the members."

Attest:

JOHN C. MILLS,
Secretary.

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MEMOIR

OF

JAMES WILLIAM BEEKMAN.

A week had hardly elapsed after the summer meeting of the Society, when the announcement was made that one of our oldest and most honored members had been taken from us,—JAMES WILLIAM BEEKMAN was no more. A deep pang of sorrow went to every heart. Calmly, in the soft air of early summer, in his own house and city, and surrounded by his children, on the 15th of last June his spirit gently passed from earth.

To him a kind Providence vouchsafed the privilege of dying in the place where he was born—a privilege, in this age and land of unwonted activity and perpetual change, rarely granted to, and as rarely appreciated by, us Americans.

Fitting it was that his life should end in this city of New York, with which his own name, and that of the ancient family from which he sprang, had been so long and so honorably connected.

In the course of his life he had been absent from it much, had traveled often and far, in America, in

Europe, and in the Orient; and of late had passed a very large part of every year at his beautiful seat on the waters of Long Island Sound; yet he was permitted to draw his last breath where he had drawn his first, in the city he so truly loved, and which he never forgot had been New Amsterdam before it became New York.

No descendant of the old Hollanders and Huguenots who founded this city ever bore it a stronger filial affection. There was no more striking trait in Mr. Beekman's character than the eagerness with which he ever entered into whatever would promote New York feeling, and New York interests, civil, commercial, æsthetical, social, moral, religious, or charitable. And with this trait, too, he had the liberality to aid, the mind to plan, and the hand to execute.

The head of the ancient family of Beekman, he was born on the 22nd of November, 1815, and was the only son of Gerard Beekman, of New York, and Catherine Sanders, his wife, a lady of one of the oldest families of Albany.

He was of the sixth generation of Beekmans in America, and the fifth in direct descent from that William Beekman who first landed in New Amsterdam with Director-General Stuyvesant, on the 27th of May, 1647, two hundred and thirty years and a half ago, and who was subsequently so prominent in the public affairs of the province, and Vice-Governor of the Dutch colony on the Delaware.

Although William Beekman was a native of Statselt, in the province of Overyssel, in Holland, the family

is of German origin. His father, Henry Beekman, having been driven from Berge, in Germany, on account of his Protestantism, fled to Holland, of which his wife was a native, and where he ever afterward dwelt.*

A man of some means, William Beekman brought out to New Amsterdam a few families of Germans, whom he settled about ninety miles above New Amsterdam, upon the eastern bank of the Hudson, at a place to which, from their native river, and the first syllable of the patronymic of their patron, they gave the name so familiar to our ears at this day—*Rhinebeck.* †

On his mother's side, James William Beekman was a lineal descendant of Major John Alexander Glen, of Scotia, on the Mohawk, opposite Schenectady, of which latter place he had the command when it was attacked and burned by the French in mid-winter, 1689. It was this officer whose life and property they spared, on that night's merciless massacre, because he had, by a stratagem, once rescued a Jesuit missionary from death at the stake by the hands of the Mohawks.‡

In Mr. Beekman's veins ran the blood of De Bough, Abeel, De la Noy, Keteltas, Sanders, Glen, and Ten Broeck. He was thus of almost unmixed Dutch and Huguenot descent, and hardly a drop of English blood beat in his heart.

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* Holgate's American Genealogies, "Beekman."

† Ibid.

‡ Communicated by Mr. Beekman himself. See, also, O'Callaghan's and Brodhead's Histories of New Netherland.

Educated in New York, Mr. Beekman graduated at Columbia College, in 1834, and afterward studied law in the office of the late John L. Mason, not with the idea of practicing, but merely to acquire that general knowledge of its principles which should be possessed by every gentleman.

His father, who died the year before he graduated, left him an independent fortune. Subsequently his uncle James, after whom he was named, left him the large landed estate of the family on the East River, with its historic mansion, built by his grandfather, James Beekman, a little after the middle of the last century. His marriage to Miss Abian Milledoler, a daughter of the Rev. Dr. Milledoler, the late well-known Dutch clergyman, occurred in 1840. He then refitted the old house for his home, reverently preserving all its antique features and objects of interest, and there dwelt till forced from its occupancy by the resistless progress of the city's growth. Even then he did not suffer it to be destroyed, but built an extra foundation to keep it up, when the lines of a new street cut down the hill upon which it stood. Thus it remained many years longer, and was only removed finally a very short time ago. And when its last day did come, Mr. Beekman, with characteristic feeling and generosity, presented the great carved wooden mantel-piece and chimney breast, with its tiled fire-place, which adorned its drawing-room, to the New York Historical Society, which has carefully re-erected them in its Library Building, where they can now be seen.

This Beekman House, though built as late in the

colonial days as 1763, was of marked historic interest, from the scenes of the American Revolution which it had witnessed, and the actors in those scenes who had dwelt within its walls.

It saw Lamb's midnight surprise and capture of the King's magazine in the little cove of Turtle Bay, almost beneath its very windows, in the night of the 20th of July, 1775. The next year, on Sunday, the 15th of September, 1776, its inmates looked down upon the most magnificent spectacle the waters of New York had ever seen. Covered by a furious cannonade from five frigates lying in the stream, Howe's great army, embarked in a crescent-shaped flotilla of three hundred boats, glittering in scarlet and steel under a brilliant September sun, swept in magnificent array from the shores of Long Island across the East River, and landed in triumph at Kip's Bay. They saw then, too, as the boats touched the shore and the first "thin red line" quickly formed, the "dastardly conduct" of the panic-stricken troops of Connecticut fleeing from their intrenchments, and the rage and despair of Washington at whose voice, command, and threats, they refused to rally; and who himself, in a paroxysm of anger, dashed his hat upon the ground, and had to be led from the spot by the hand of an aid-de-camp, to avoid certain capture, if not death.*

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* Letter of Col. Nicholas Fish, Hist. Mag., 2d series, vol. ii, p. 33; Greene's letter to Gov. Cooke, of Rhode Island, Force's Archives, vol. ii, p. 370, 5th series; Gordon's History, vol. ii, p. 327; Irving's Washington, vol. ii, p. 353; Littell's Graydon's Memoirs, p. 174.

Within its walls, on the night of that same day, Sir William Howe established his headquarters, and it remained in his possession till the succeeding May.

The lurid light of the great fire glared through its casements on the night of the 21st of September, 1776. In the greenhouse in its garden, cleared for the occasion, sat, a few evenings later, the court-martial which condemned to death the youthful Nathan Hale—he who, at Washington's personal request, became a spy, and unhappily taken in the act, undauntedly met the death of a spy—thereby proving himself one of the bravest as well as purest patriots whom the Revolution produced.

In this house, too, dwelt for a year and a half that magnificent beauty of Boston, whose Sultana-like charms were as fatal to Sir William Howe as were those of the Egyptian Queen to Marc Antony—the celebrated Mrs. Loring.

It was afterward, in succession, the headquarters of Sir Henry Clinton; General Robertson, the last royal governor of New York; and Sir Guy Carleton, the last of the British Commanders-in-chief.* Clinton possessed it for three years and a half—from October, 1778, to April, 1782. During this period it was occupied, after their return from captivity in Western Virginia, by the chivalrous commander of the German troops of Burgoyne's captured army, Baron de Riedésel and his fair, beautiful, and charming wife, with their young children, for whom it had been

* It was the summer residence of the British Commanders during the whole war.

kindly given up for a brief period, that the latter might there undergo the dread ordeal of inoculation. In the summer of 1780 the Baron and his wife again accepted Clinton's invitation to pass there the summer months, he himself often visiting them. "The last time he came to see us," says this charming lady in her journal, which has recently been given to the world, "he had with him the unfortunate—as he afterwards became—Major André; who, the day after, set out upon the fatal expedition in which he was captured by the Americans and hung as a spy."

The walls of that house probably heard some of the latest, if not the very last, of their consultations upon the nefarious plot of Arnold. From its door, gracefully bidding adieu to the beautiful Baroness, rode Clinton and André to attend the farewell dinner given that very evening by his brother officers to the latter before he started on his ill-starred expedition, at the old Kip House, at Kip's Bay, They knew he was to leave on a matter of military importance, but that was all, and little could they gather from the remarkable toast given by Sir Henry Clinton at that brilliant table, "The health of Major André, who leaves us tomorrow to return Sir John André."

From its broad piazza, far across the beautiful river and its fair island, in the cool days of autumn at this period, could often be heard the huntsman's horn, and sometimes seen, the scarlet coats, gay habits, and dashing horses, of the hunters and huntresses, as they pursued the flying hounds and fox over the meadows, hills, and vales, of Newtown, — a sport maintained

by the English officers and their American friends during almost the entire British occupation.*

When Sir Guy Carleton, after performing his duties in the closing scenes of the British possession, had in concert with Washington fixed the time for the evacuation, he, a few days beforehand, departed for the last time from the Beekman House—leaving it in the custody of its old gardener, who had steadily retained his place under all its different occupants.† And how well he performed the duties of his station was unexpectedly and agreeably proven on the 25th of November, 1783. That morning General Washington, who had stayed the few days preceding at General Morris's, at Morrisania; Governor Clinton, who had stayed at Mr. Frederick Van Cortlandt's, at Kingsbridge, and General Knox, who had stayed at Mrs. de Lancey's, at Rosehill, West Farms‡ (the widow of Peter de Lancey and daughter of Governor Colden), left these three houses early, and rode to Harlem to join their troops and make together their triumphant entry into New York.

As the city was not to be given up till the middle of the day, the column moved slowly. As it passed the Beekman House, these officers, their staffs, and a few civilians who accompanied them, were enter-

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* Communicated to the writer some years ago by one who often personally enjoyed these hunts.

† He kept a written memorandum of the names of the different occupants and the time each was in possession, which is still in the Beekman family. His name was John Hannah.

‡ MS. letter of Gen. William Hull, dated November 16th, 1783, stating these arrangements, as made by him with the gentlemen and the lady named.

tained in its drawing-room with punch made with lemons plucked from trees growing in the green-house.* Thus, strangely enough, his first social glass to America wholly free, was drank by the Great Chief in the old Headquarters of the British Commanders, and in sight of the very place where he had been momentarily unmanned by the result of one of the first of their successes seven years before.

These striking memories of his ancestral home, which appealed so strongly to Mr. Beekman's native love for the days and times of old, were the cause of his persistent preservation of the venerable mansion for long years after almost any other man would have had it removed.

The city's expansion, at the same time that it forced him from his house, also threw upon him the management of the large estate surrounding it. To this duty he gave his personal attention and care, and it absorbed all the time that men in business usually devote to their avocations. He had to learn, and did learn, when to build, where to build and how to build; and, what was perhaps hardest of all, when and where *not* to build.

The knowledge he thus acquired, of what may be termed ædileship, he subsequently utilized in the many boards of management of the charitable, literary, and religious corporations in which he became so ardently engaged during his later life.

A strong supporter of the common school system, when the schools were really common schools, he

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* Communicated by Mr. Beekman himself.

served for a time as a member of the Board of Education.

He was earnest and active as a Trustee of Columbia College, the Woman's Hospital, the old New York Hospital, and was connected with many other charitable and religious associations.

Mr. Beekman early took an interest in politics. He was a hard worker, a wise counsellor, and a clear but not an eloquent speaker, although oftentimes both humorous and witty.

He was elected to the Assembly from the old sixth district of the city in 1848, and served during 1849. In the autumn of the same year he was chosen a Senator from the city, and served during the years 1850 and 1851. He was a Whig—a Silver Gray Whig—and opposed strenuously that policy of his party leaders which, yielding to a kind of radicalism, wielded by a powerful but malign influence, now passed away, eventuated finally in the destruction and extinction of that great political party. He was too honest a man to yield his convictions in matters of principle, and too independent to bend the suppliant knee to self-appointed dispensers of party power. At the end of his senatorial term he withdrew from politics, and never could be induced to re-enter the field.

In the spring of 1861 Mr. Beekman, the late Erastus Corning, of Albany, and Mr. Thurlow Weed were appointed by a meeting of conservative men in New York, as representatives of the Conservative Whig, the Democratic, and Radical Whig parties, to go to Washington and urge President Buchanan to relieve

Fort Sumpter, and stamp out the incipient rebellion. The latter did not go, but Mr. Beekman and Mr. Corning did, and urged measures which, if honestly carried out, might have obviated that great calamity.* On the outbreak of hostilities, however, Mr. Beekman strongly supported the National Government, and was one of the founders of a club instituted for its support in this city, called the Union League Club, of which he was for a time vice-president, and which in a slightly different form still exists.

Thirty-one years ago, on the 9th of June, 1846, Mr. Beekman became a member of the St. Nicholas Society, and from that time to his death we all know his earnestness and activity in everything pertaining to its objects, interests and welfare, and how greatly he enjoyed its intellectual meetings and its social festivals. In 1850 he was chosen one of the stewards, and in 1852 was elected a manager, which office he held at the time of his death. For the four years from 1863 to 1866, inclusive, he was third vice-president; and in the autumn of the latter year was elected president, and served most acceptably as such for the years 1868 and 1869. He closed his official term by delivering, on the 4th of December in the latter year, before the Society, an address on "*The Founders of New York*," which for its great interest, wide information, keen humor, and high literary finish, will be long remembered by all who heard it, and which the Society honored itself by publishing in an enduring form.

* Mr. Beekman's letter of Nov. 3, 1876, to the editors of the *Evening Post*.

For many years he was a member of the Century Club. On the formation of the St. Nicholas Club, in which he took an ardent interest, he was unanimously chosen its first president. How well he adorned his office, and how efficiently he promoted the interests of that club, its present prosperity sufficiently attests. The very last day he was out, the Thursday before the Paas meeting of that Club, he was engaged in inviting special friends to that festival. The writer accidentally met him on that morning in the office of a mutual friend, to whom he brought a card of invitation. As he presented it he urged the gentleman to be sure to come, saying that he should not only be there, but "should make a little speech on the occasion." Alas! before that day arrived, he was seized with the attack to which he finally succumbed.

I cannot close this brief memoir of our friend without adverting to his long connexion, for more than a generation, with the New York Historical Society. Its objects were dear to his heart, and early and late, in season and out of season, he labored in its behalf. He gave freely to its objects, and to its collections. For forty years, save one, he was an active member, and his interest in it never flagged; and at the time of his death he was one of its Vice-Presidents, and a member of its Executive Committee. Entering its Library one morning, hardly three years ago, the writer found the Librarian examining two large, splendidly-bound folio volumes, most beautifully printed in the Dutch language. "See," said he, "here is the finest copy in America of the first Dutch Bible ever printed in Holland. It is a perfect treasure, and has just been

given to us by Mr. Beekman." He had, indeed, done so. Learning that this rare work was for sale in the city, he at once, after satisfying himself of its genuineness, bought it though held at a large price, and sent it to the Library. Such was Mr. Beekman's last gift to that Society, and it was characteristic of the man in more ways than one. For he was a true Christian gentleman, a student of the Bible, and a warm member of the old Church of Holland, the Church of his ancestors and himself, in which he was born, in which he died, and in which he was buried. This did not, however, prevent him from attending the Presbyterian Church of his warm personal friend, Dr. John Hall, nor sometimes the services of the Episcopal Church. But his religious principles never varied. He has gone to his reward. Long will this Society remember the bright, genial, temperament, the lively, cultured, conversation, the quick, sportive, witty, remarks, the cordial manners, the sound head, and the warm heart, of James William Beekman. A truer New-Yorker we shall never see, a nobler Hollander we shall never know,

"Of soul sincere,
In action faithful, in honor clear."

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